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**WINTER EVENT**

Santo Cielo  
Wednesday, February 16th  
at 10 AM  
*Details on page 14*

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▶▶ publisher's note

# TWO STEPS FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK

After the holidays subsided, it seemed that we were back to square one with the current COVID-19 situation. Generally speaking, authorities do their best to educate the public to make informed decisions, but this is uncharted territory for all of us. The Delta and Omicron variants have become curveballs in our longing to get back to the way life was before 2020.

If I have learned anything over the past twenty-four months, it is to be flexible. And even more so, to be flexible among my flexibility. Proverbs 16:9 comes to mind, "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." As a real estate community, we need to have an abundance of grace for one another. I am directing these words to myself more than anyone reading this.

On Christmas Eve, my wife and two oldest daughters tested positive for COVID-19. Thankfully the symptoms were mild, but they still had to take the necessary precautions and quarantine. This meant I was on duty with our two youngest children (ages two and four) for the duration of the isolation time. This was not part of my plan for the holiday break; I planned to have some downtime with my (whole)

family, rest, and catch up on some work-related tasks while I wasn't in the field. The first few days were not fun, only because I had not made the mental shift into my new "full-time single dad" role. It took me several days to embrace and actually enjoy the time with my two little kids.

When anticipating an event, a meeting, or any positive interaction, it is disheartening when it doesn't come to fruition. The pandemic has accelerated our learning curve to process change, and our Real Producers community has done a great job pivoting as needed. Since this is the current state of our world, we will brace ourselves for flexibility and work together to continue to connect, elevate, and inspire our community.



Andy Burton  
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# 2022



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**REAL PRODUCERS PANEL  
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16TH  
10:00AM-1:30PM**

It's 2022. What now? We just went through the most unpredictable two years in the business.

- What does the future hold?
- What is 2022 going to look like?
- What are you doing to galvanize your business for the unknown?

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# MJulie Mara

*Reeling in Success*

agent feature ◀◀

By Lauren Young  
Photos by KDE Photography

“Success is accomplished through tenacity and perseverance,” says REALTOR® Julie Mara of Baird & Warner in Downers Grove. “If you use a continued effort to achieve something despite difficulties and stick to a plan with a course of action, anything is possible. This statement is true in real estate, fishing, and life.”



As Julie and her siblings grew up on the southwest side of Chicago, Julie dreamed of owning her own home someday, and also looked up to her hardworking parents' example. Her mom, especially, became her lifelong hero and number one supporter.

“My mother was the best mom anyone could ask for,” says Julie. “She was my best friend and my daughter’s best friend. She was the valedictorian of her high school graduating class, and was a great example of achieving goals through hard work.”

One of Julie’s favorite jobs before she got into real estate was one she held for many years: she was an executive assistant to a high-level executive at a large corporation in downtown Chicago. Her ability to expertly maintain his calendar; arrange travel; plan events, lunches, and parties; and help with business reports and projects won her outstanding reviews.

But when her daughter, Nichole, was little, Julie chose to work part-time in medical billing for neurology and rheumatology departments—a position which allowed her to balance her career with raising her daughter, and witness many firsts in her daughter’s life. Even though she had scaled back her work hours, her colleagues recognized her outsized workload capacity. ●●●



...

“People at my office said that when I went on vacation, it would take three full-time people to do the job that I did in twenty hours per week!” she laughs.

But her real estate dreams and the experience of owning a few homes with her husband, Larry, drove her to pursue her real estate license in 2002. She wanted to be part of helping others experience the joy of homeownership. She says, “I love being part of their home-finding and selling process, and see the joy in their eyes and smiles on their faces at the closing table and beyond. My clients’ best interests are always my top priority.”

In her over nineteen years as a REALTOR®, Julie has earned Baird & Warner’s Chairman’s Club, President’s Club, and Vice President’s Club awards; as well as the Leading Relocation Specialist and Military on the Move® credentials. She’s also been named on the Baird & Warner Top 1% Mortgage Sales, Top 1% Mortgage Units lists, and won their Five Star Professional Award seven years in a row. She’s also received Homesnaps’s Top 15% and Top 20% awards.



“

**I’M FORTUNATE TO BE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING THAT I LOVE TO DO AND MAKE A LIVING DOING IT. ONE OF MY CLIENTS RECENTLY TOLD ME THAT I WAS BORN TO DO THIS. I BELIEVE REAL ESTATE WILL ALWAYS BE PART OF MY LIFE IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.**”

Julie and her family love to fish and go boating. When she, Larry, and Nichole, visit their favorite spots in Florida, she and Larry will wake before the sunrise to catch fish from the beach. “It’s exhilarating to land a big fish from the Gulf and experience nature in all its finest.” she says. Nichole loves to fish too: she won her first tournament at age five, took time off from college to participate in the FLW (Fishing League Worldwide) Fishing Tour, and along with being a junior high teacher, she is now a high school fishing coach.

Julie and Larry recently celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary, and are they are looking forward to many more happy years together.

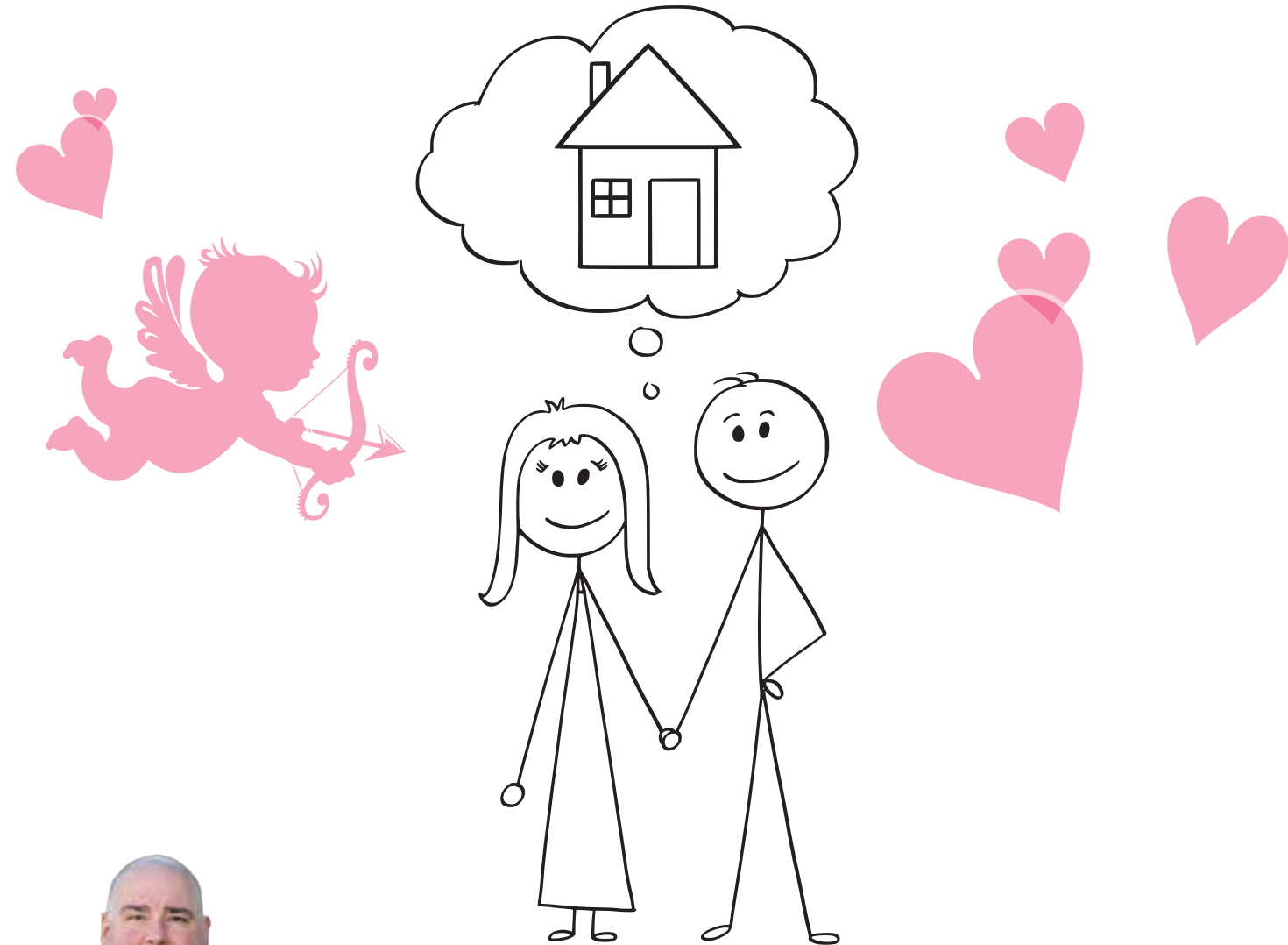
Another positive to being a REALTOR®, as Julie sees it, is the opportunities to give back to her community. “Baird & Warner donates through the Good Will Works, and at our office we have a food drive, a coat drive for veterans, and we participate in Toys for Tots,” explains Julie.

“I’m fortunate to be able to do something that I love to do and make a living doing it. One of my clients recently told me that I was born to do this. I believe real estate will always be part of my life in one way or another.”



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**Jam Session #9** **f LIVE**  
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## events

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As an organization, we are fully aware of the need to creatively connect, inspire, elevate, and add value to both our REALTORS® and Preferred Partners. As a response, we have continued hosting virtual jam sessions with the *DuPage Real Producers* community.

Jam sessions are small group Zoom calls designed to get a handful of experts on a call (both REALTORS® and Preferred Partners) to discuss what they are seeing in their industry and to help add value to the individuals who are able to tune in. This is a great way to meet people on a more personal level and to get to know what's happening in different industries in the real estate community.

Jam sessions have been filled with creative ways to encourage our *DuPage Real Producers* community to continue to engage and serve as a way to build relationships. Plus, it has been great seeing even more engagement as we have been hosting sessions on Facebook Live!

A huge thank you to all our amazing REALTORS® and Preferred Partners for your willingness to join together as a community and maintain our human connection!



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**Jam Session #10** **f LIVE**  
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We have received great feedback about these events, so we are continuing to schedule them. Want to join one? Let us know by emailing us at [andy.burton@realproducersmag.com](mailto:andy.burton@realproducersmag.com).

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**N2 GIVES**

▶ cover story

By Lauren Young

Photos by KDE Photography



# Mala Gandhi

## *Writing the Book on Customer Service*

**“Every REALTOR® says they could write a book with all the things they’ve seen,” says Mala Gandhi of @properties in Downers Grove. “I was once showing a house and somehow the master bedroom door got locked from the outside. We were all stuck in the room for hours. Funnily enough, the family loved the home and made an offer.”**

Between Mala and her parents, also real estate pros, they could probably write a few books of similar stories. Mala’s parents emigrated from India and worked continuously to provide a strong future for Mala and her three sisters. Born in Elmhurst, Mala has lived in the western suburbs all her life.

Watching her family manage their many investment properties, Mala learned early that real estate is a 24/7 business. After attending college in New Orleans, where people, Mala observed, “[esteem] the importance of hospitality and going above and beyond what is expected;” then holding an internship at Walt Disney World, Mala added the value of customer-centricity to her future approach to service.

“My experiences in hospitality showed me the importance of going above and beyond what is expected,” she says. “At Disney World, they treat every guest like a VIP. They are unparalleled at understanding people’s needs and excel at meeting them. That training has never left me.”

After graduation, Mala helped her parents with their real estate business and realized that she enjoyed working on her own schedule and running her own business. She joined a different agency, and, as the youngest agent in her office, her managing broker gave her crucial advice.

“He told me, ‘You will have to work twice as hard to get half the respect,’” she remembers. “I needed to hear that. It made me extra determined to earn every bit of each client’s approval.”

Mala took on the challenge to do just that. She worked tirelessly to provide the best service and highest-quality marketing materials, and to share her knowledge from her real estate experiences growing up.

“I love having the privilege of working with people I would never ordinarily be able to meet, and having them entrust me with their home purchase or sale,” she adds. “I take great pride in that trust and

...  
never  
take  
for granted  
what a gift it is."

Twenty years into  
her career, Mala has  
earned her reputation as  
a trustworthy REALTOR®.

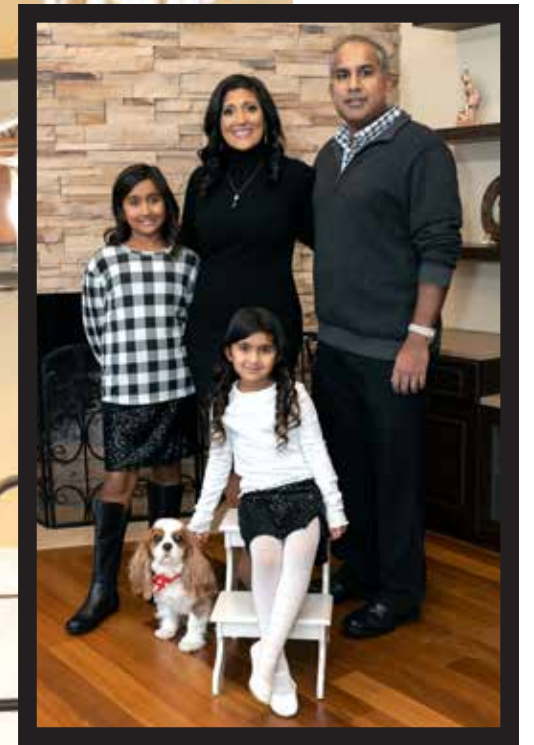
Her sales volume last year alone  
topped \$10 million. "My measure of  
success," says Mala, "is the happiness  
and well-being of my husband, kids, and  
myself. Creating a work-life balance was  
never easy, but I knew I had to do that to be  
the best agent and representative for my clients.  
Seeing that all the people in my life are happy  
directly correlates to my success."

When Mala is not managing her real estate business,  
she and her husband, Abhishek, and their two daugh-  
ters, Sanaya and Riya, enjoy going on bike rides, hiking  
local trails, and enjoying the serenity of nature together.  
They also have a garden where they grow and harvest  
crops. Mala's daughters are active in Bollywood dance,  
Girl Scouts, swimming, and other sports. The family also  
takes turns spoiling their Cavalier King Charles Spaniel,  
Raja (which means "king" in Hindi).

As Mala looks to the future, she can't help but reflect on how  
big a role real estate has played in accomplishing her dreams.

"My past is filled with real estate, and my future will be,  
too," she affirms. "I've been thrilled to see my business grow  
bigger and stronger. I get the same rush of excitement when  
my clients want to venture into investment property. I just  
love being that trusted source."

"The best reward is when former clients invite me back  
to their homes just to see all the improvements or  
personal touches they have made," she adds. "Or when  
they reach out with questions on the latest trends or  
house paint colors. The highest reward is when I am  
referred to family and friends of my past clients  
and it truly becomes a full circle. My clients know  
they can always count on me."



“

I've been thrilled to see my business  
grow **BIGGER** and **STRONGER**. I get  
the same rush of excitement when my  
clients want to venture into  
investment property.

*I just love being that trusted source.*

”



# TONY PERRI SR.

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## HOMETOWN LENDERS, INC.

### Outworking the Competition

Tony Perri arrived in Chicago in July 1983, right after graduating high school, with just a suitcase and his '82 Firebird. Tony, a first-generation Italian American, was born and raised in the Seven Mile and Gratiot neighborhood of Detroit. A go-getter out of the gate, he got himself a job as a dishwasher when he was just thirteen years old. By fourteen, he was laying railroad tracks with his father.

"I worked more and harder than every other kid I knew and saved my money," says Tony. "By the time I had my [driver's] license, I'd bought a nice, fast car."

After moving to Chicago, Tony took up a job in food sales, an industry he would work in for over fifteen years.

"When I got into sales, coming from a union city, my entire family would ask, 'How do you make a living

with no hourly paycheck?'" he says. "I told them that I'd outwork everyone and win. And I did."

"I never had a chance to go to college," Tony adds. "So I always had to rely on my tireless work ethic to achieve success."

In the mid-1990s, Tony joined REALTOR.com as a vice president, where he worked to set up a network of service providers. After working for five years in tech sales, the early 2000s dot-com bubble crash had him rethinking his career options. ...



...

“While working at REALTOR.com, I realized that I loved real estate,” says Tony. “I saw the mortgage industry as a new challenge in that arena, so I joined Chicago Funding in Addison.”

As the vice president of sales, he helped the mortgage firm explode in growth—from \$300 million to over \$1 billion in volume in just three years. He then decided to open his own mortgage branch with Top Flite Financial, where he would stay for the next ten years. In the early days,

his only staff member was his oldest son, Tony Jr. The company has since grown to over forty employees, twenty of whom have been with them for over seven years; Tony Jr. has been in charge of operations for the past twelve years and originates about \$30 million a year himself. In early 2018, the Perris decided to align with HomeTown Lenders—a move which allowed them to bring their 100+ years’ experience and every piece of the mortgage process in house to better serve clients in the Mokena area.

# “HARD WORK IS A SKILL THAT NEVER FAILS AND TRANSLATES TO ANY INDUSTRY, EVERY EMPLOYEE, AND EVERY CLIENT.”



really grew as a company when I hired a coach about four years ago. I still utilize a coach to keep me and my team on a consistent path.”

When Tony is not managing his business, he loves spending time with his family, and enjoys golfing and talking about cars. This year, he celebrated thirty-five years of marriage to his wife, Caryn, a constant supporter of his business and their family.

Since he started working with his father at age seventeen, Tony Jr. decided to focus on mortgage processing and then underwriting. He now originates loans and oversees the firm’s back office. Tony Sr.’s other son, Nicholas, is a certified registered nurse anesthetist; and his daughter, Julia, is a nurse at Lurie Children’s Hospital in the heart transplant unit.



Tony Perri with his team (Rachael Schrank, Loan Officer Assistant and Cody Hoffman, Licensed Business Partner)

“We work harder than any other mortgage company—[we work harder] because that is how I was brought up,” says Tony. “Hard work is a skill that never fails and translates to any industry, every employee, and every client.”

HomeTown Lenders, Inc. strives to make the residential loan process seamless for agent referrals and clients, and they take great pride in their ability to help self-employed borrowers. They also have expertise in supporting clients who own multiple companies or have several tax returns.

“What makes us stand out is our ability to control a file, from start to finish, entirely in-house,” he says. “We have our openers, processors, underwriters, and closers on-site in our Mokena office. It helps us move much faster and without loss of knowledge.”

With an inside staff of thirty individuals supporting ten loan officers, they move quickly and efficiently in

turning loans over, while still focusing on close client relationships.

“Having licensed assistants allows me to give personal customer service to agent referrals, and also gives me time with my family,” says Tony. “I personally talk to every client referral and introduce them to my team so we can get every loan done quickly and efficiently.”

Tony and his team have seen big changes in mortgage processes and laws during his twenty years in the broker business. Stricter regulations regarding documentation and compliance and more, began to be put in place in the early 2000s, but especially after the market crash in the mid-2000s. It takes dedicated, diligent brokers to keep up.

“We all still need some fresh ideas and creative people to bounce ideas off of to keep our company performing at its best,” explains Tony. “We

“When I’m not working, Caryn and I love to travel; we used to travel to sporting events around the country because all my kids were on travel teams as they grew up,” says Tony. “We bought a lake house in 2017, and that brings all the kids and grandkids together about twelve times a year. All the kids and spouses are into wakeboarding and wake surfing.”

Looking back on his first days in Chicago, Tony can’t believe how far he’s come. He still gets excited about outworking the competition and giving unmatched service to his partners and clients.

“I still get a thrill out of seeing first-time buyers get excited about the purchase of a new home,” he says. “And about the opportunity to close a loan in fifteen days that another company turned down. It seems to happen three to five times a month. We never shy away from a challenge because we know we can do it.”

To contact Tony and learn more about the services available at HomeTown Lenders, Inc., call 708-932-2793, email Tony at [anthony.perri@htlenders.com](mailto:anthony.perri@htlenders.com) or visit [www.htlorland.com](http://www.htlorland.com).



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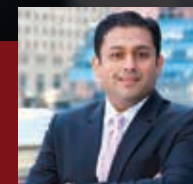
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agent feature

By Lauren Young  
Photos by AbiV Photography

# Shane Halleman

*Farm Kid Makes It Big in the City*

“On the farm, you don’t stop working till everything is done,” says Shane Halleman of John Greene REALTOR® in Naperville. “For years I didn’t mention to my clients that I was a farm kid. It wasn’t until a builder I was working with learned of my background and said, ‘That’s why you are such a hard worker and attack everything head-on.’”

The Halleman family’s livestock farm was located in a small, rural town in central Illinois. Shane’s father would get up before the sun rose to attend to the animals before going to his full-time job selling livestock feed to other area farmers. Once his sales calls were done, Shane’s father would finish the farm’s many chores.

“I look up to my parents more than anyone else,” says Shane. “They are two of the nicest and hardest-working people you will meet. They taught me so much, simply by the way they lived their lives.”

Farm life taught Shane about the importance of self-motivation and a good work ethic, but, beyond living those values, he had no idea what he wanted for his future, what career path to take. In the early 2000s, a recruiter from DeVry University visited his high school. Jobs in tech looked like they’d pay well, so Shane pursued his degree in computer information systems at DeVry in Addison, Illinois.

“That’s what led me to the Chicago area and [that move was] probably the biggest milestone to where I am now,” reflects Shane.

Shane went on to work as a computer programmer for a large printing company. Over the next few years he would experience two messy corporate mergers. His once small, caring company became large, cold, and bottom-line minded.

“I watched coworkers get terminated—people that were really good at their jobs—just because they were a number,” he says. “The company I originally started with appreciated their employees and treated us like we all mattered. As the mergers happened, the focus went away from the employees to just profits. That stuck with me and still influences the attention I give my customers and partners today.”

As his role became less appealing, he realized crunching code in a cubical wasn’t his ideal future. Part of his job in IT was to support the end users of computer software. In these one-on-one interactions, he discovered he had a talent for making connections with people. While he considered a new career, he saw a booming housing market inspire a few of his friends to get their real estate licenses. Still in his adventurous mid-twenties, Shane decided to try it out too. ...

...

"I really thought, 'How hard can it be? People will just line up, and I will sell them homes,'" he laughs. "What a reality check that was."

"No one tells you how hard it is to meet those people and earn their trust," he reflects. "At that time, I didn't know if I would ever be a full-time REALTOR®, and I definitely didn't know I would still be doing it all these years later."

Now, sixteen years later, Shane has tallied a total career volume of \$160 million in transactions, surpassing \$25 million last year alone. Over the years, his strong performance has earned him the John Greene REALTOR® 150 Million President's Club award (2020), and he was listed among RealTrends National Top 250 Individual Agents in 2013, and among RealTrends Illinois Top Individual Agents in 2020.

"The most rewarding part of my business is sharing my clients' happiness as they better their lives," says Shane. "I like to say I have the heart of a teacher because I find joy in being their trusted advisor through the process. It doesn't matter if this move is their first or their tenth, they need direction and education. I work to build a connection that doesn't end at the closing."

When Shane is not managing his real estate business, he enjoys spending time with his thirteen-year-old son, Aidan. They enjoy hunting for rare Funko Pops, watching the newest Marvel movies, and trying new recipes together. With so many dining options and cultural cuisines in Chicago, Shane also includes restaurant trips and craft beer brewery visits as go-to pastimes. His favorite hobby, however, is drag racing Ford Mustangs.

"Like everything I do, it started off [as something] small and fun—just something I enjoyed doing in my spare time," says Shane. "Over the years it became more and more serious. Now, like my real estate career, it's more like an obsession."

In 2014, Shane started competing at national races, traveling as far as Florida and Mississippi to compete. In October 2016, Shane was speeding at nearly 160 mph when his Mustang crashed. Thanks to his safety equipment and little luck, Shane walked away without injury. His close call forced him to take a break. A temporary break, that is.



**THE MOST REWARDING PART OF MY BUSINESS IS SHARING MY CLIENTS' HAPPINESS AS THEY BETTER THEIR LIVES.**



Shane with his son, Aidan.



Shane ready to start a race.

"When you have passion for something like that, you can only stay away so long," he says. "We are now building another car and looking to start racing again in 2022."

As Shane looks forward to next year, beyond racing, he's excited to grow his successful business and support team. Currently, Shane and his full-time assistant serve their many clients, but he's in the process of adding two buyer's agents to expand their impact.

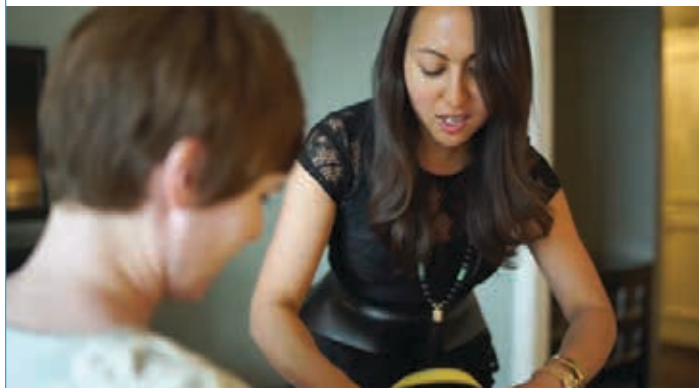
"Becoming a successful REALTOR® was [about] a lot of luck and timing," says Shane. "I didn't come up with anything revolutionary or do anything new to be successful. In many ways, I feel like I am just an executor and a grinder. And to think, I didn't believe being a hard-working farm kid would be an asset."





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